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COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
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Agenda item 4 (b)*

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION

Implementation of the rules and regulations on the control and limitation of documentation: compliance with the six-week rule for the issuance of pre-session documentation

1. By paragraphs 7-10 of its resolution 47/202 B, the General Assembly, inter alia, urged the Secretary-General to take necessary measures to ensure that pre-session documents for meetings are distributed no less than six weeks before the meetings in all official languages, unless there is a specific decision by the body concerned regarding the timing of issuance of pre-session documentation; urged substantive departments of the Secretariat to comply with the rule which requires them to submit pre-session documents to the Office of Conference Services (OCS) at least ten weeks before the beginning of sessions, in order to permit processing in time in all official languages; requested the Secretary-General, in the context of the measures mentioned, to review all of the factors involved in the timely issuance of pre-session documentation, including the quality and timeliness of submission to OCS, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session through the Committee on Conferences.

2. The above-cited requests of the General Assembly focus primarily on Secretariat action to cope with the documentation workload. However, this issue is two-sided in that the initial requests for documentation, i.e., reports of the Secretary-General, emanate primarily from intergovernmental/expert bodies. There have been numerous appeals to Member States and to subsidiary organs aimed at limiting, wherever possible, the quantity of documentation to be processed within the Secretariat.

3. Most recently the General Assembly, on the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences, adopted paragraph 12 of the same resolution, by which the General Assembly urged subsidiary organs to review their agendas with a view to enabling the Secretariat to comply with the six-week rule, inter alia, through combining agenda items and limiting requests for pre-session documentation; and requested the Secretary-General to inform the subsidiary organs of this appeal and to report to the Committee on Conferences on the measures taken to this effect.

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* A/AC.173/150/Add.1.

4. In order to comply with this request, OCS has communicated with the Heads of Departments and Offices and all Committee Secretaries in order to bring the relevant decisions, requests and appeals of the General Assembly regarding, inter alia, timely availability of pre-session documentation to their attention and, through them, to the attention of the intergovernmental bodies themselves.

5. The report of the Secretary-General requested in the above-cited resolution will be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session through the Committee on Conferences for review and comment. The present report provides an outline for the study, which includes some indication of preliminary findings, as well as areas identified for further study. It is presented to the Committee on Conferences pursuant to a decision taken at its organizational session, held on 2 March 1993, to receive an interim report on the matter at its substantive session of 1993. The Secretariat looks forward to receiving the Committee's views and comments thereon.

6. The outline of the proposed study is as follows:

Part one

I. Definition of documentation policy

The attention of the Committee is drawn to the Report of the Secretariat as contained in document A/AC.172/141, of 7 August 1990, in which the Secretary-General presented a review of the implementation of all rules and recommendations relating to the control and limitation of documentation, with particular attention to the "six-week rule". It was reported therein, that directives for the control and limitation of documentation are prepared in response to resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly as well as on the basis of analysis by the Secretariat of its experience in processing parliamentary documentation. After review and approval by the Publications Board, the directives are issued by the Secretariat as addenda to the regulations for the control and limitation of documentation issued as administrative instruction ST/AI/189 on 7 November 1969. This series of directives also covers other aspects of the publications policy of the Organization, which is the subject of a report currently before the Committee (A/AC.172/153).

OCS will review and update existing editorial directives and manuals in order to assist staff of author departments who are assigned to plan, draft, submit and coordinate parliamentary documentation and to ensure that the quality, compliance with page limitations and deadlines for submission are in accordance with established procedure.

II. Factors involved in timely issuance

The stages involved in processing documentation can be subdivided into forecasting of workload, drafting and submission of manuscripts, and the processing within OCS for eventual issuance as documentation of the United Nations. On the one hand, these imply separate areas of responsibility between author departments (i.e., issues of quality and timeliness of manuscripts submitted for processing) and those of OCS (i.e., editing, translating, typing,

printing and dissemination). On the other hand, there are inter-related areas of coordinated responsibility relating to forecasting, planning and training.

The Secretariat will report on each of the stages involved in issuing parliamentary documentation and on the outcome of its analysis, including, as appropriate, action taken on proposals currently under consideration to address the situation in the areas of management, finance and procedures.

A main difficulty encountered and often reported on is the need to process priority documentation which very often necessitates postponing work on documents submitted in a timely manner. OCS will incorporate into the final report a representational breakdown of documentation workload using actual workload statistics and based on the theoretical assumption that no documentation was already in the pipeline at the start of the representational period. This portion of the report will include information on the number of pages of pre-session parliamentary documentation originally forecasted and actually submitted and the number of pages of priority parliamentary documentation submitted, as well as other documentation submitted during the representational period selected. It is anticipated that this analysis will clearly demonstrate the impact of priority documentation submitted with tight deadlines and of late submission of pre-session documentation on the documentation-processing services.

III. Prevailing situation with regard to timely issuance of documentation

The current situation with regard to compliance with the six-week rule has reached a critical stage. One primary factor is timely submission to OCS at least 10 weeks prior to the scheduled start of sessions, which in turn allows four weeks for OCS to complete the other required steps. When author departments fail to observe this rule, the turnaround time is reduced, which leaves OCS in a position where it in turn does not have sufficient time to comply with the six-week rule for issuance. As the number of documents submitted late increases, there is the resulting and persistent bottleneck in the documentation-processing pipeline, which increasingly places OCS in a position where it may knowingly have to set aside documents submitted early in order to address the priority created by late submission. In short, it is not always feasible to observe the six-week rule for one body at the expense of another - particularly one that is about to convene its session.

OCS has been able in many cases to take urgent action to deal with such occurrences by cutting document turnaround time to compensate for late submission. As a result of the increased volume of documentation to be processed in general, the late submission of some documentation and the increased volume of Security Council documentation that must be processed immediately, OCS' room to manoeuvre has all but disappeared. Thus, intergovernmental/expert bodies are experiencing an unacceptable situation where what was once considered to be an emergency, i.e., issuance of pre-session documentation when sessions start, rather than six-weeks in advance, is quickly becoming the norm, and the Secretariat must engage in exercises of crisis-management as part of its routine, rather than on an exceptional basis.

It may be said that the past biennium has been extraordinary and that much of this can be attributed to the impact of the new demands on and changing priorities of the Organization, and the subsequent restructuring of the Secretariat. This has led in some cases to increased workload in the author departments, and in turn in OCS, and to delayed submission and issuance of documentation. However, at this point there does not appear to be a basis for assuming that the net effect on documentation workload and its processing will improve.

Further, over the last year the staffing table of OCS has been reduced by 29 professional posts, and the possibility of further redeployments to other priority areas remains. Short-term solutions, such as a substantial infusion of funds for temporary assistance for crisis periods until the prevailing backlog could be cleared and the documentation process could be brought up to speed could be contemplated. This alone, however, would not address the larger problem described, and it may be anticipated that the overall situation would rapidly deteriorate again.

What would constitute a more practical solution is one that reflects the realities of the changing workload of the Secretariat as well as its priorities, a plan that addresses the role of the Secretariat as a whole in a systematic and comprehensive way, and one that holds institutional implications for the long term.

Once it is recognized that the documentation workload of the Organization is increasing, the role of OCS in addressing this is: to identify the resources necessary to manage it; to ensure that the workload is, to the extent possible, distributed evenly over the biennium; to make recommendations to and cooperate with, author departments as appropriate, on ways to improve the quality and timeliness of submission of documentation; and to seek the assistance and guidance of the Committee on Conferences in ameliorating this situation. In other words, OCS would pursue a multi-faceted plan of action aimed simultaneously at the areas directly within its purview as well as those such as forecasting, planning and training which, as indicated above, can be considered inter-related areas of coordinated responsibility between separate units of the Secretariat.

Part two

IV. Findings and recommendations

This section will include more formal recommendations of the proposals outlined in the relevant sections presented in the present report, including, but not limited to, the following areas of attention.

A. Coordination and training

As indicated above, a primary contributing factor to difficulty in the processing stages for a given document is the quality of the submission in terms of length, conciseness and uniformity in presentation for parliamentary documentation. It is believed, therefore, that a need exists for renewed and intensified training of staff in author departments assigned to plan, draft,

submit and coordinate parliamentary documentation in: editorial guidelines and directives of the Secretariat, rules and regulations for the control and limitation of documentation, format and style for reports of intergovernmental bodies and of the Secretary-General to intergovernmental bodies, and principles of report writing in general. This may be particularly true at this time in light of the prevailing situation of the Organization, the restructuring of the Secretariat, the reassignment of staff to new responsibilities, and the burden of additional work leading to less time for preparation of more documentation.

OCS has conducted preliminary consultations with the Office of Human Resources Management and will collaborate in the development of a training course on preparing parliamentary documentation as part of the communications component of the Comprehensive Management Development Plan already under way in the Secretariat. In a related matter, and as requested by the Committee on Conferences, the Secretariat, in cooperation with UNITAR, is incorporating relevant information in the training programmes for new delegates and Secretariat officials.

In addition to updating the relevant editorial directives, and guidelines for drafting of reports prepared by the Secretariat, OCS would provide further assistance by preparing supporting materials for the course curriculum, devising a standard format for reports, including those of the Secretary-General and of intergovernmental bodies, and participating as trainers in the course.

Clearly, this activity requires not only interdepartmental cooperation and support throughout the Secretariat, but in a manner and at a level consistent with the position that it is the role of the Secretariat as a whole to address the question systematically, comprehensively and as an institutional arrangement. OCS would suggest that while other drafting courses may be open to all staff on a voluntary basis, participation in these specifically structured courses would be mandatory for staff assigned the responsibility of parliamentary documentation. The participants would be designated by senior management of the respective departments. In order to improve management of the reporting process, another recommendation could be that author departments, as a matter of course, should identify the officers to whom they will assign the responsibility for specific documentation for the intergovernmental body or bodies governing the activities of the department. This would include: planning for preparation and processing, drafting documentation, ensuring timely clearance by the department for submission to OCS, coordinating with and responding to inquiries from OCS or the secretary of the body in question and providing additional information or assistance as required. It is anticipated that this approach would serve to develop the skills and abilities of staff and promote consistency in compliance with proper procedure and centralize and strengthen accountability in the reporting process overall.

B. Budgetary provision/staffing resources

Experience has now shown that OCS cannot function at the same level, much less meet increased demands, with its present reduced staffing structure. As part of the preparation of its budget, proposals for the biennium 1994-1995, OCS has investigated and will submit, as appropriate, proposals for budgetary provision that reflect the increased documentation-processing workload via the

appropriate combination of established posts, resources for contractual translation and related services, and provision for temporary assistance.

C. Forecasting/planning

OCS will continue to improve planning by intensifying its consultations and negotiations regarding meeting dates for eventual inclusion in the calendar of conferences and meetings, taking into account the Secretariat's ability as a whole to prepare and process documentation. This would include, inter alia, ensuring the application of relevant rules and regulations for control and limitation, vis-à-vis the rules, regulations and guidelines for scheduling meetings of intergovernmental bodies, seeking more accurate quantification of the volume of documentation for each intergovernmental body, and promoting greater reliability of forecasting information received. It is expected that once the most problematic areas and sectors in terms of regular late submission of documentation have been identified, the Secretariat, i.e., OCS in consultation with the relevant departments, would endeavour to determine the factors causing the problem and what steps could actively be taken jointly to alleviate the problem.

Concurrent with these activities and also based on their outcome, OCS will endeavour, in cooperation with author departments, to promote a programme for documentation forecasting and management to increase efficiency in the documentation process. By maintaining open channels of communication, particularly in an effort to keep apprised of changing needs, OCS hopes to further develop its "early warning system" that would allow it to improve its planning and scheduling of required resources for the documentation workload anticipated at any given time.